When Feathered Friends Become Feathered Foes

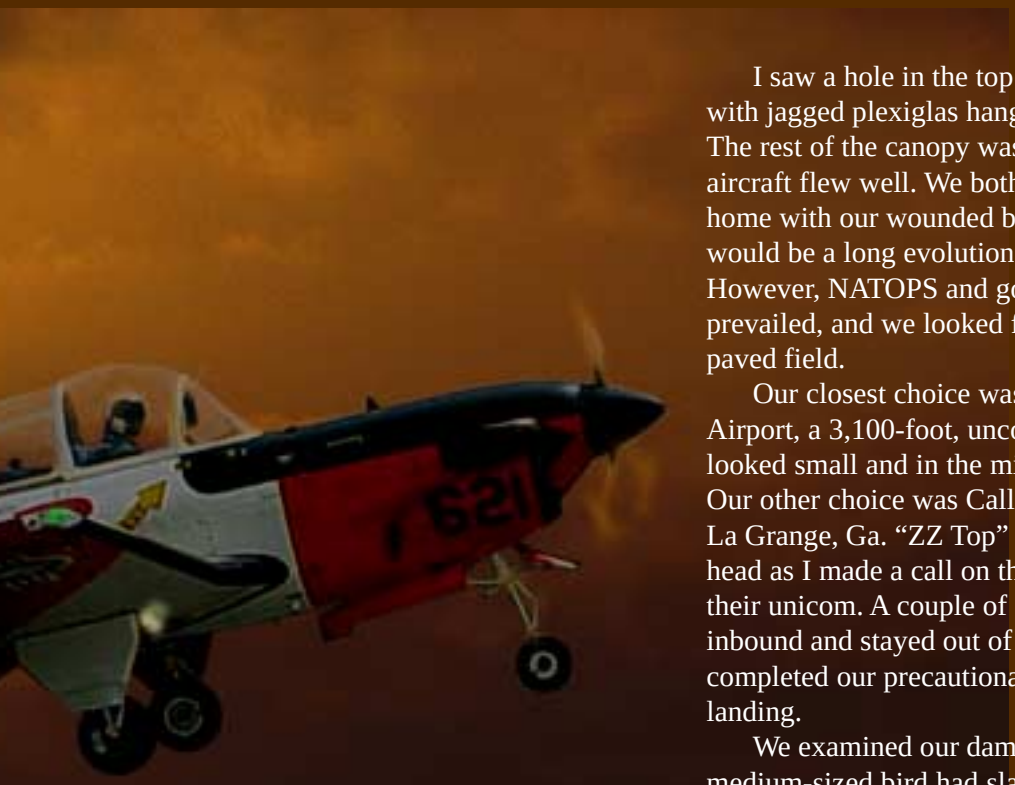
by Capt. Mike Lakin

"So, where do you want to go for this out-and-in?" What a great question to ask a naval aviator. As a T-34C flight instructor, the entire United States is my canvas and visual navigation is my brush. A typical day as a VNAV instructor and squadron stage leader can allow for flights up to 1,200 miles away from home, but the typical out-and-in usually consists of a 200-to-400 mile leg, a stop at a first-class FBO, and a nice relaxing ride home. No two VNAV hops are ever the same as my story will tell.

"Let's go to Fulton County-Brown Field up in Atlanta," I said when my student, one of our IPs getting an upgrade qual, called. "They have a decent restaurant, and if we break down we are at a Raytheon service center." (Raytheon is our contract-maintenance provider.) T-34s generally don't break down, but because I'm a helo pilot by trade, I'm always a little pessimistic about the aircraft.

Going into the Atlanta Class–Bravo airspace, VFR, at 200 knots and 1,500 feet AGL, is no easy task. You would have thought we were planning a strike mission as we prepped up our VFR sectionals, terminal-area charts, jet cards and navigation logs. We briefed the entire route looking for obstacles, altitudes, and any hidden airspace or restricted areas on the chart. We picked our checkpoints with the greatest of care.

Our flight into Atlanta was fine. Nothing beats a good VNAV! If two Marine helo drivers can't make it to Atlanta during the day using a chart and compass, they should be sent back to the Basic School for remedial land navigation. We landed, fueled the plane, and



headed straight to Shoney's. Just before entering the crew van, we changed the visors on our fixed-wing helmets. After filling up on the all-you-can-eat buffet and discussing world events, we took off on the night leg back to Whiting Field.

I took the controls so my student could concentrate on navigation. I climbed from 2,500 feet to 4,500 feet. Our minimum night altitude is 2,500 feet, but I stepped up so we could activate our VFR flight plan with the FSS. A full moon rode high in the clear, dark sky. As I was looking down at the chart, we heard a loud thump, then the sound of rushing wind. I spit out a few feathers that had been blown into my mouth. Keeping my head down, I glanced at the engine instruments and rolled my eyes forward into the darkness. Although we were still flying, I expected the rest of the windscreen to cave in at any moment.

"Hey, you OK?" I heard over the ICS as I pulled up into a steep climb. I told the student to find us the nearest field as I checked the controllability and condition of the aircraft.

I saw a hole in the top of the windscreen with jagged plexiglas hanging in the wind. The rest of the canopy was fine and the aircraft flew well. We both wanted to cruise home with our wounded bird, knowing this would be a long evolution once on deck. However, NATOPS and good headwork prevailed, and we looked for the nearest paved field.

Our closest choice was Chambers Airport, a 3,100-foot, uncontrolled field that looked small and in the middle of nowhere. Our other choice was Callaway Airport near La Grange, Ga. "ZZ Top" rang through my head as I made a call on the VHF radio to their unicom. A couple of civilians were inbound and stayed out of our way until we completed our precautionary emergency landing.

We examined our damaged aircraft. A medium-sized bird had slammed into the windscreen just to the right of the OAT gauge, and then glanced off into the night. The result was a softball-sized hole with some loose fragments of plexiglas scattered throughout the cockpit. Part of the bird ended up on the backseater's map. I had two small cuts on my chin from the exploding plexiglas, and a few scratches on my clear visor.

Forty-eight hours and a new windshield later, we headed home. As luck would have it, seven days later I smacked into another bird at night on a VNAV hop. This time, my student was in the front seat. The windshield was left intact, and we suffered only minor damage to the metal frame.

These incidents were unusual. Most bird strikes occur during the day, at altitudes generally below 1,000 feet, and usually the bird doesn't go through the windshield. The peak migration seasons—spring and fall—obviously present a greater risk. The best prevention is to keep your eyes out of the cockpit and in front of the aircraft.

Capt. Lakin flies with VT-2.

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